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ABSTRACT

Age appropriate training programs in natural environments for deaf-blind adolescents help to develop functional skills, with the ultimate goal of independent living and work placement. Other approaches to the education of handicapped children entail activity for the sake of activity, or babysitting and fun activities. The actual training of a severely handicapped individual on a real job has been found to accurately demonstrate the active potential of a student. The more severely disabled a person is, the less likely training (including classroom and on-campus work adjustment training), will transfer to real job situations. Currently, most severely handicapped students are first placed in a sheltered workshop after an initial work evaluation. Rarely is consideration given to immediate competitive job training. Although the sheltered workshop is appropriate for some individuals, too many capable people are allowed to work at substandard facilities for far less than minimum pay. Region 20 Education Service Center in San Antonio, Texas, operates an expanded independent-living apartment program, which includes "live-away" fieldtrips for weekends. These experiences allow normal peer social interaction in ways not as often seen in self-contained public school classrooms. Allowing independence and initiative means risk-taking, which provides the opportunity for students to reach their full potentials. The alternative of meaningless activities and lifetime disability benefits to individuals who have the potential and desire for independent functioning handicaps society as well as the disabled person. (SEW)

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Community Based Training - Non-Traditional Curriculum Options for Work and Independent Living Training of Secondary Deaf-Blind Adolescents

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The Texas Education Agency estimates that it costs approximately $6,000 annually (in 1979 dollars) to educate a deaf-blind child. If one hundred deaf-blind disabled students are educated over a 20 year period, such training costs for the one hundred students would be approximately twelve million dollars.

If, upon completion of their education, these students can work and live independently, the costs to the taxpayers are terminated. If these individuals are unable to work, Texas taxpayers must provide economic support including social security disability insurance (SSDI) as well as medical coverage, all valued at about $9,000 per individual annually. For one hundred disabled Texans over a fifty year period, this multiplies to $45 million dollars.

Furthermore, disabled deaf-blind people are often forced to reside in nursing homes, state schools, or other state supported institutions. In 1982, the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation reported that it cost over $74.00 a day for each resident in Texas State schools. This computes to an approximate annual cost of over $27,000 a year per individual and over a fifty year period for 100 disabled Texans, the costs are over 135 million dollars.

If only fourteen of the original one hundred disabled individuals learn to live independently, then the original twelve million dollar educational investment made for all one hundred individuals is recovered. Likewise such invest-

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ments are recovered if only nine of the one hundred individuals both learn to work and live independently. The bottom line is that with appropriate education and independent living and work training, more disabled students can learn to live and work independently as adults, causing a sharp reduction in an otherwise overwhelming tax burden converting them from tax users to taxpayers. With only a 28 percent success rate in employment, a 16 percent success rate in independent living and a 9 percent success rate in the two combined, educational investments are fully recovered, if appropriate instruction is provided.

Methods for instructing handicapped children have been around for many generations now, and still we are seeing far too many disabled adults "graduate" from 16 to 33 years of special education instruction functioning in ways that suggest school has provided little to their benefit. It seems that most special education students are fulfilling very low expectations made of them for far too many years. If at a younger age, puzzle pushing, block games, and "fun city" were the only activities expected of you, what would you now be doing as an adult?

There appear to be three basic approaches to the education of handicapped children - activity for the sake of activity: babysitting; fun for all, at all times: the Happiness Center approach; or chronological age appropriate functional behavior skill development in natural environments, with the ultimate expectation of independent living and work placement. Still, the majority of instructional setting options for most severely handicapped students appear to be self-contained classrooms, generally located at out of the way elementary school campuses. The toughest task for special educators is to put an end to babysitting, by offering instead strategies and instructional designs leading to functional adult age appropriate behavior, for every student.

Most state education plans for the child-centered process require some form of a vocational work evaluation prior to a special education students' placement in a primary vocational program or job.

However, for the severely handicapped individual, while a hands-on work

task may demonstrate more about work potential capabilities of the student than does a psychological assessment, one needs to consider that work evaluations alone do not necessarily predict the ultimate capability. Instead, the actual training of such a person on a real job has been found to accurately demonstrate the active potential of a student. One fact has now become cogently clear: the more severely disabled a person is, the less likely training, including classroom and on campus work adjustment training, will transfer to real job situations.

However, there is realiable information which comes from a work evaluation. Such assessments give a baseline for present work attending behaviors, physical limitations including range of motion, endurance, and overall work tolerance. It is also interesting to note motivation comes from a highly interesting work task, as compared to dull repetitive ones such as envelope stuffing. How much more a real job situation means to students as compared to simulated work training has consistently been demonstrated.

After an initial work evaluation, most severely handicapped students are first placed in a sheltered workshop; rarely is consideration ever made for immediate competitive job training. People placed into sheltered workshops are usually placed there for one of two reasons: 1) the person may be so severely disabled; that the sheltered workshop may be considered the "best" place to be due to the nature of the student's severe functioning, 2) the person is placed for temporary work evaluation and work adjustment training pending eventual competitive placement. But, the sad fact of the matter is that while numerous disabled students and adults do need sheltered employment as the least restrictive environment in relation to their present capabilities... far too many capable qualified people are allowed to work...at sub-standard facilities for far less than minimum pay, even when they are producing with 100% efficiency. Seventy years ago, we would have called such places (at least for the non-disabled employee), sweatshops.

It was interesting to note that disabled people were often less inhibited

in public areas as compared to their hesitancy demonstrated in a 1:1 training situation. It also has been especially significant to note that many community trained students re often the first to arrive at their work station...what was it that would motivate such disabled person to be so prompt? Obviously, experience has shown that real work environments are more interesting than puzzle pushing and bead making.

Is it not a higher quality of life when a severely handicapped person is allowed to work at highly motivating tasks?...than to see the same person in a self-contained classroom repeating over and over again the meaningless tasks which some special educators have seen fit to have him do? Likewise, in spite of the independence demonstrated by young adults, there are those overly conscientious people who still, unknowingly, go out of their way to over-assist disabled people, undoubtedly due to the general public underestimating what such individuals can do for themselves.

In October 1980, the Region 20 Education Service Center opened an expanded independent living apartment program, which conducted training on a 24-hour-a-day basis, serving up to 6 students at any one time. Students were also involved in 'live-away' fieldtrips where for a weekend at a time, such students traveled to a camp, hotel or condominium to recreate and carry out the preparation of -heir meals and conduct normal independent living activities required in a home.

There were also students who obviously preferred to be at home, even though their parents obviously preferred they learned to live on their own (this was and is true in the homes of many non-disabled young adults as well). Overall live-away and independent apartment training sites, allowed for normal peer social interaction in ways not as often seen in self-contained public school classrooms. The interaction of two peers involved in something as simple as washing dishes, often had a profound effect on expanding the quality and depth of peer relationships. To allow emerging adults to make their own decisions, instead of some adults constantly directing what is to happen next,

not only allows mature decision making to take place by the disabled students, but demonstrates the understanding and maturity of adult trainers to accept the principle of 'risk' taking as well.

Allowing independence and initiative means 'risk taking'. If we are unwilling or unable to take such 'risks', we will never see the full potential of individual student gains which are possible when such an approach is otherwise encouraged. Indeed, just because older adolescents and young adults are disabled, does not mean that adult staff should always be directly supervising their activities.

The Region 20 community based project has hired disabled consumer advisors part-time to advise staff on programming, and to interact with the students, teaching numerous social activities by students through their own direct interaction. While some students were loners, preferring to do activities by themselves. Individual choices were honored for a congenial person's life space... even though several opportunities were offered for peer interaction.

The first live-away experience at a camp or other setting, has demonstrated who needs what type of personal self-help skill development, such as shaving. Many young men, had never learned how to shave independently. Given the opportunity, people do demonstrate independence.

Everyone does whatever they do do, for a reason. This is true whether they are disabled students on non-disabled adult volunteers. Whatever the unconscious motivation behind the action of community volunteers, what we measured were the benefits accrued by those affected.

There is a time for independence building. There is a time for encouragement toward new experience. There is even a time for privacy amidst the crowd. There should never, however, be a time for meaningless activity. There should be time for friendship. But also a place for personal life space, and freedom from patronization.

Staff, teacher, aide, counselor, work trainer, home manager, parent, it's

really up to you to be yourself and allow independent functioning of those with whom you work. Staff should have a right to be personal, letting the student get to know them. For unless you are willing to be natural, and start working with disabled persons instead of for disabled persons, we could easily be back in the babysitting syndrome.

A chronological age appropriate employment and living in natural community environments makes so much more sense if schools are to provide curriculum which will aide severely disabled students to become taxpayers instead of tax users. Independent living is the right to a chosen lifestyle which empowers a disabled person, regardless of the type and the severity of disability, to live where and how he/she desires...including the opportunity for education, employment, housing, recreation, transportation, and general community access in a manner that is not dependent upon others.

It costs society one million dollars to amintain an unemployed disabled person during his working years. Forty billion dollars of government money goes each year for disability benefits. One third of the 1977 social security tax hike was required to pay for disability benefits. Almost one-half of the adult disabled population is on or near the poverty level. Of all families on welfare, 20% are there because the head of the household is disabled. One out of six Americans is disabled...that's 30 million people.

By the year, 2,000 there will be one chronically ill, over 65 disabled person for every able-bodied person in the country. Do we wish to see disabled persons as taxpayers or as tax users? When society handicaps disabled people it handicaps itself as well.